

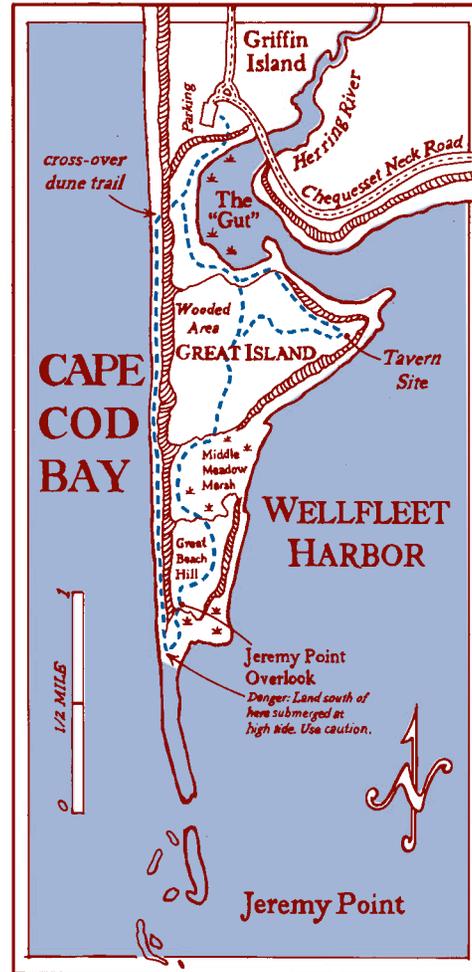
A Changing Landscape

In a world being settled, the assets of a land were used to support people. The original hardwood forest of Great Island provided timbers for homes and ships and wood for charcoal, salt-making, and the rendering of whale blubber. Oysters were harvested as a famous Wellfleet delicacy, and their shells were burned to make lime; horses, pigs, and sheep were pastured on the island; and by the 1880s, a cranberry operation was attempted.

Inevitably, Great Island changed. Shore whaling was essentially finished by 1740, in 1770 the Wellfleet oyster beds inexplicably died out, and by 1800 Great Island was largely deforested.

Finally, pitch pines were planted in the 1830s to stabilize the wind-eroding, bay-filling soil, and plants have been reclaiming the land ever since. A number of animals will never return including wolf, bear, and the extinct heath hen. But in time, and with care, a forest of oaks and other hardwood will grow here – and we perhaps can visualize the woods again echoing with some of the life those early people once knew.

“The tides giveth and the tides taketh away” could have been the motto of Billingsgate Island. While Bound Brook, Griffin, and Great Island eventually became connected to the mainland, Billingsgate was destined to become the “disappearing island.” During the early 1800s the island hosted a community of some 30 families, a school, and a lighthouse. But tides and currents eroded this sandy outpost located just southwest of Jeremy Point. In 1915, the brick lighthouse and keepers quarters, the last remaining structures on the island, were inundated and abandoned. By 1935, only mudflats were visible at low tide – a reminder that Cape Cod is a constantly-changing landscape.



Please remain on the designated path, and use the established crossover trail to the beach. Foot traffic erodes sensitive dunes. Remain on designated trails to reduce exposure to disease-carrying insects, poison ivy, and other risks. Observe trail conditions while walking, and be aware of tree roots, stumps, and other naturally-occurring hazards.



The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

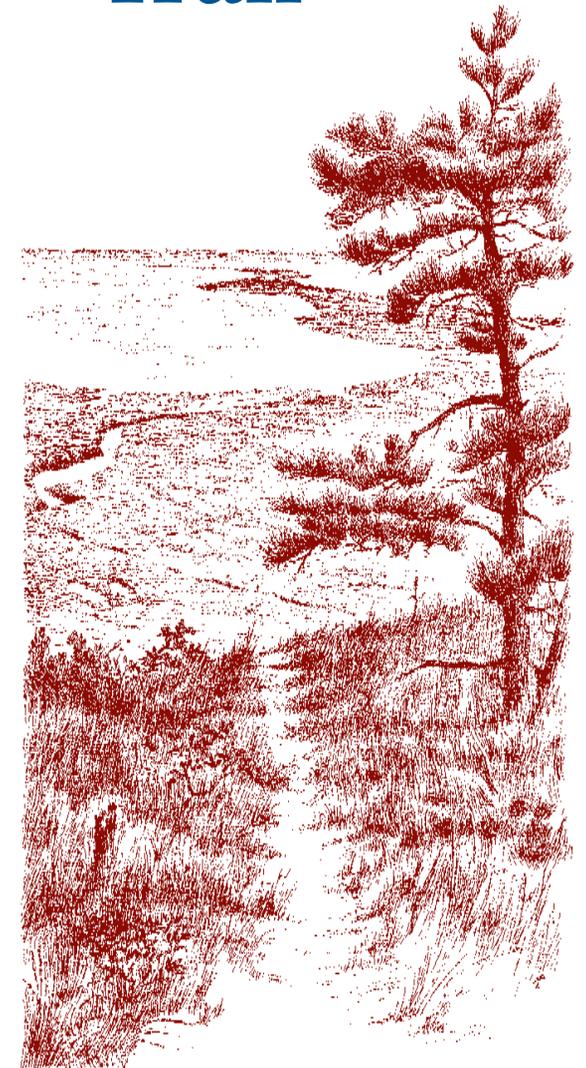


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Great Island Trail

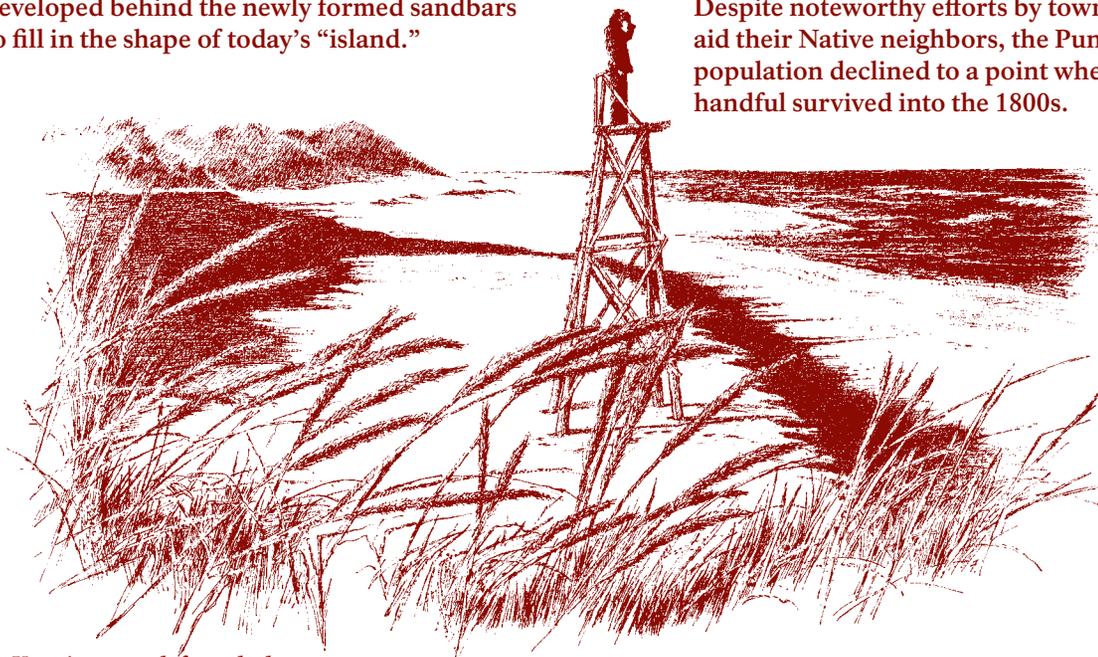


An Island Appears

When first viewed by Western explorers, Great Island was an island – a high mound of outwash debris left some 18,000 years ago by melting glaciers, then surrounded by the rising sea. Herring River once emptied into Cape Cod Bay north of Great Island, and Great Beach Hill stood as a separate island.

But land is not frozen in shape, even less so when it is composed of rock powder, sand, gravel, and boulders – the crumbly mixture that is called glacial drift. And so steadily, inevitably, the land has changed.

Great Island stood alone as late as 1831, but the current of Cape Cod Bay sweeps southward along this coast, eroding projections of land and filling depressions. As a result, sandbars gradually grew to connect island to island, and island to mainland, and form the smooth sweep of the coastline. Marshes then slowly developed behind the newly formed sandbars to fill in the shape of today's "island."



Keeping watch for whales.

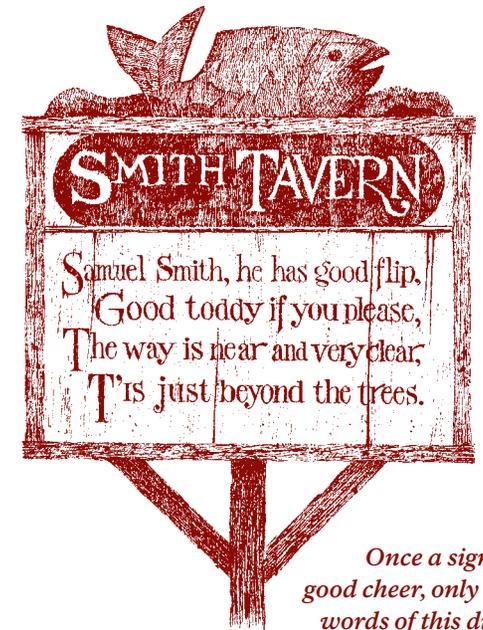
The Punonakanits

Well before the arrival of Europeans a resourceful people lived on Great Island using the bounty of bay and shore. The local natives, known as Punonakanits, were members of the Wampanoag Federation. An ossuary (the technical term for a multiple burial) discovered in the late 1970s on nearby Indian Neck, points to an advanced, well-developed society. During the woodland period, these people used agricultural practices to sustain them throughout the warmer months, and supplemented their diets with shellfish and other marine resources in winter.

The Punonakanits population remained relatively stable throughout the 1600s. Pilgrim law assured the sharing of certain resources, and Great Island was set aside as a common land for use by both groups. However, the smallpox epidemics of the mid-1700s were particularly devastating to the Punonakanits. Despite noteworthy efforts by townspeople to aid their Native neighbors, the Punonakanits population declined to a point where only a handful survived into the 1800s.

Whalers, Whaling & Taverns

How abundant were the resources of the New World! Whales and fish were in profusion, and both were successfully caught within Cape Cod Bay by members of the Wampanoag Federation, and the European settlers who followed them. Eventually, whale lookout towers were built on Great Island, where mariners could better search for right whales and blackfish (the small, toothed pilot whale). As Wellfleet grew, so did its traffic of coast vessels, which used this once fine harbor to serve the thriving settlements.



Once a sign of good cheer, only the words of this ditty survive as a part of local tradition.

Eventually, a tavern was built around 1690 on Great Island. The tavern provided hospitality for three or four decades. But as shore whaling died away, so did the business which it supported, and sometime before 1740, its operation was ended. By 1800 the island was deserted.